



[Manchester Jazz Festival 2012](#)

Some reflections by [Charlotte Starkey](#) July 2012

**“After silence, that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible, is music.”**

(Aldous Huxley,  
*Music at Night and Other Essays*  
, 1931)

**“If you find a note tonight that sounds good, play the same damn note every night.”**

(Count Basie - recalled by Harry ‘Sweets’ Edison, trumpeter in  
*Count Basie’s Orchestra*  
)

In a key policy for urban renewal UNESCO defined a vision for humanising the city at the turn of the millennium, placing the individual at the centre of public policy and realising opportunities for cooperative action in the urban space (Brigitte Colin, *Unesco's Vision for Humanising the City* – 14th June 1996). Whilst she was a specialist in Unesco's involvement in the Arabian region, the vocabulary occurs frequently in discussions of urban regeneration globally: 'inclusiveness', cosmopolitanism, cultural access, the significance of the 'informal spaces' within the city environment – those spaces, events and situations where the initiatives arise from individual and group aspirations, rather than through recognised official and semi-official regulated social, political, educational and/or cultural formal arrangements.

This is not a new cry; it echoes concerns that reach back to nineteenth century social theorists. Outside the Town Hall, as the music played on the opening Saturday of the Jazz Festival, I read the blue plaque commemorating Alfred Waterhouse, the designer of the building completed in 1877; and I was reminded of an early influence on him, Augustus Welby Pugin who had published *Contrasts* in 1836. Pugin's manifesto forcibly articulated the dehumanising effect of cramped city spaces during the Industrial Revolution. He contrasted images of the nineteenth century city with its medieval counterpart, arguing for a return to Gothic style design. There we were last week, outside a triumphant example of a Gothic Revival building, one of the finest in Britain, endowed by merchants some of whose wealth in cotton was inextricably linked to the slave plantations of America.

Outside, in Albert Square the inheritors of the music and techniques of those slaves who created the blues resonated in rhythms and distinctive modes with those beautiful 'crushed notes'. As the jazz moved and swayed, the guitars, saxophones, trumpets and percussion were playing next to, within earshot of, the statue of Oliver Heywood, a wealthy Victorian philanthropist. He was not involved with slavery but it reminded me that the banking ancestors of the Heywoods, those of Liverpool, made their fortune in the 1700s in the transportation of slaves as the demand for cotton and other goods increased. In contradictory aspirations, embedded in the wealth of the cotton industry, the architecture of the Town Hall reflected that Victorian celebration of wealth combined with attempts to humanise the urban space of the Victorian industrial city.



The indigenous victims of industrialisation, the working classes of the towns and cities of England, could view a Victorian building that mocked many in dire poverty with its evocation of a fairy palace: marble balustrades, columns and staircases. It was a medieval monastic foundation, a grand cathedral with hints of a Great Banqueting Hall, a truly gothic architectural fantasy resonating, not with Plain Chant as in medieval times, but now with the improvisations of jazz. And the music of those on whose suffering towns and cities of England were built was now playing wonderfully outside the very symbol of the wealth created out of such conflict. The world was in the audience, enraptured, multi-national, supra-national, appealing at every venue, in every event, to a rich divergence of cultures.

All this is not to sound pompous in what is intended as a reflective piece on the past glorious week of music in Manchester but arose from thoughts as I sat, stood, lounged with many others in different venues listening to the sounds of jazz. All around were people whom, mostly, I did not know, of all ages, all nations, all kinds of work. No one had to bring us there. We came for our own different reasons, just passing through, passing by, wanting to be there, individual daily routines re-organised so that we could be there, planning the day to move from one gig to another, or just curious. Yet at every point when I was in town the Festival Pavilion and St Anne's Church were full when the jazz was playing live. The Royal Northern College filled with committed audiences. Animated chatter, happy faces, the glancing smile, the focused intent expression, listening, tapping feet, swinging in rhythm – all were part of the autonomous bodily

responses when the rhythms from the blues began to work their magic. Children spontaneously erupted into their own play as the music played.

The music itself reflected this rich mix of diversity. On Sunday (15th July) **Junk Jam** (directed by Leon Patel and Holly Prest with

[Global Grooves](#)

) appeared in vibrant, youthful colours, masks from the bestiary for a carnival, instruments out of recycled materials. The open air performance filled Albert Square with a roar of percussion, the cue for a dog by chance standing by to join in competing with the chorus on its own terms. This was a riot of rainbow colour to help the opening weekend settle the rhythms with local dancers and instrumentalists making music, inspired by rhythms from around the world.

Then on Tuesday (17th July) what for me was a new musical delight, saw [TG Collective](#) in the Festival Pavilion give an outstanding performance. They are an accomplished group from the Midlands specialising in gypsy, flamenco, bolero-type music and they riveted a packed audience till the last encore. Two guitars (Jamie Fekete, Sam Slater) talking to one another, playing against one another, in the hypnotic rhythms of flamenco, improvisations around dance and jazz fusions, left the centre of Manchester spellbound. A final flourish from the violinist (Louis Robinson) during an encore that one did not want to end was a superb conclusion to a very impressive musical display of talent with flute (Holly Jones), double bass and trumpet (Percy Pursglove) and percussion (listed as Tom Chapman, Joelle Barker). I 'popped in' for thirty minutes, and stayed for an eternity that passed all too fleetingly, spellbound by the music.

It all led me to marvel at the organisation bringing so many excellent musicians from the local region, further afield in Britain and from across the seas to this space in one city to delight and entertain through their musical talents; and how it was possible to entice so many people into one space together, in a busy city centre location, to relax, listen, enjoy and then move on to another venue, or back into the routine of different lives. No one gave the command; there was

no obvious material benefit to be gained or alternative urgent need to be met in another life. The routine of city life was, within the musical space, suspended. The security was discreet in its presence, barely noticeable except as a participant in the atmosphere. The city centre became a haunt of music lovers and it welcomed the gathered throngs invitingly.

Social and political theorists, preachers, architects, planners, novelists, poets, painters and, yes, musicians, have found, and still do find, the city a magnet for their views upon a whole range of human emotion from fascination to fear, outrage to optimistic hope, disgust to delight. Whilst we have endowed the city with the language of the human body giving it arterial roads, a beating heart, a place of waste, a brain, even a personality, we condemn its impersonality. It is the space where apocalyptic destruction seems to attract the prophetic doom analysts. A rioting city, a shameful city, a city of darkness, sometimes a university or cathedral city, a city whose churches testify to past attempts to reform variously deemed wayward community groups – not just Manchester, but any city on the planet, all have individually vastly different connotations and yet can share a judgmental vocabulary of condemnation. And this past week Manchester, whose location gave a home to the Romans, surrounded by Blake's 'dark Satanic Mills' of yesteryear, whose poverty so horrified Engels, whose smog-bound beauty inspired Valette, where Sir Charles Hallé established an orchestra whose clubs in the 50s and 60s in places like

***The Twisted Wheel***

throbbed to the sounds of 'soul', was a city of jazz.



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